Church

AS I HAVE STATED ON THE TWO PREVIOUS SUNDAY'S I AM PROFOUNDLY IMPRESSED WITH YOUR ENDEAVORS: WITH YOUR ESTABLISHING AND BUILDING A CHURCH AND ALSO I WOULD LIKE TO REITERATE MY DEEP ADMIRATION FOR YOU. THIS IS NO SMALL STEP YOU ARE TAKING AND I AM SURE THAT YOU HAVE GIVEN GREAT THOUGHT TO THE NATURE OF THIS STEP--WHAT IT MEANS TO ORGANIZE A CHURCH, WHAT IS IMPLIED BY ASSUMING YOUR ROLE AS A CONGREGATION OF BELIEVERS IN THE ONE HOLY AND UNIVERSAL (CATHOLIC) CHURCH. AND IN THIS LIGHT I HAVE CHOSEN TO BRIEFLY DISCUSS THE CHURCH THIS MORNING, WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT IT AND WHAT OUR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES ARE--AS MEMBER OF IT.

WHEN WE VOICE OUR FAITH AND BELIEFS IN THE APOSTLES' CREED WE SAY THAT WE BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH--ESTABLISHED BY JESUS CHRIST AS THE CONTINUATION OF HIS MINISTRY, THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTION/ BEHIND ALL LOCAL CONGREGATIONS, COUNCILS, PRESBYTERIES AND DIOCESES--THAT BINDS US ALL TOGETHER AS RECIPIENTS OF GOD'S FREE GRACE AND FORGIVENESS.

THAT THE CHURCH, OR COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS IS A CORPORATE BODY IS AN UNDOUBTABLE FACT THAT WE OBSERVE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. WE BELIEVE THAT CHRISTIANS EXPERIENCE IS ECCLESIASTICAL EXPERICE, CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIFE IN A NEW COMMUNITY. THE NEW TESTAMENT DESCRIBES THE LIFE OF THIS SOCIETY AS LIFE IN THE SPIRIT. THE HEBREW WORD FOR SPIRIT ORIGINALLY DENOTED "WIND," THAT MIGHTEY

ENERGY OF THE DESERT FROM WHICH ISRAEL SPRANG. THE CHURCH, AS THE COMMUNITY OF THE REDEEMED, IS THE NEW ISRAEL OF GOD. IT IS A BODY WHSOE HEAD IS CHRIST AND WHOSE MEMBERS ARE INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS. LOOKING BACK TO PENTECOST, ITS BIRTHDAY, IT USES THIS DESERT METAPHOR TO DESCRIBE THE SPIRITUAL ENERGY ANIMATING IT. THE WORD AND THE SACRAMENTS ARE THE ORGANS OF ITS SUPERNATURAL LIFE, THE MEANS OF GRACE. THE HOLY SPIRIT, PROCEEDING FROM THE FATHER AND THE SON IS EVER THE SUPREME AGENT OF GRACE.

IN SHORT, CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT ACCIDENTLY CORPORATE, IT IS NOT A NEW COMMUNITY FOR THE SAKE OF EXPEDIENCE BUT IS IS SO BY ITS VERY NATURE AS THE BODY OF CHRIST.

PEOPLE WHO PROFESS TO BE CHRISTIAN FREQUENTLY OFFER THE EXCUSE FOR THIER PROLONGED ABSENCE FROM CHURCH ATTENDANCE THAT THEY CAN WORSHIP GOD AS WELL AT HOME, OR IN THE WOODS, OR OVER THE RADIO, AS THEY CAN SITTING IN A STUFFY SANCTUARY LISTENING TO A DRY PREACHER. THIS APPROACH IMPLIES AN INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THAT IS IMPLICIT IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP ALTHOUGH I THINK THE PERSON WHO OFFERS THIS EXCUSE SELDOM IS MOTIVATED BY THIS FEELING. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT I THINK WE CAN REGARD THIS APPROACH AS A SHIRKING OF A BASIC CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST.

THE SECOND ASPECT OF OUR BELIEF CONCERNING THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH THE INDIVIDUAL'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD, AS I PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED, I WILL GO INTO THIS ASPECT, ~~AT SOMEWHAT~~, A LITTLE LATER--BUT LET IT SUFFICE TO SAY HERE THAT MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST IS NOT AN END IN ITSELF--BUT A MEANS TO THE END OF A MORE COMPLETE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. THIS MAY SEEM A BIT CONTRADICTORY AFTER STATING THE ABSOLUTE NECESSITY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION TO SAY THAT IT IS A MEANS TO AN END. BUT AS YOU WELL KNOW OUR FAITH IS FULL OF LOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITIES--JESUS ETHIC AS AN IMPOSSIBILITY, THE INCARNATION-GOD AND MAN. THIS DISCUSSION FALLS IN THE SAME LINE. WE ARE OBLIGATED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE LIVING CHURCH, TO WORSHIP, TO RECEIVE SACRAMENTS ALL IN ORDER THAT WE may PERFECT OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND-THERE ARE NO SHORT CUTS.

AT FIRST, THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH MAY SEEM TO BE AT VARIANCE WITH THE FACTS. ALL THIS TALK ABOUT ONE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST ETC. IS NICE BUT THINGS JUST A EN'T LIKE THAT. ROMAN CATHOLICS CLAIM THEY HOLD THE KEYS TO HEAVEN, PROTESTANTS IN THE REFORMED TRADITION FROWN ON ROMAN LEGALISM, ANGLICAN FORMALISM AND EVANGELICAL ENTHUSIASM, AND FUNDAMENTALISTS ARE SURE THAT EVERYBODY IS GOING TO HELL. INDEED THE CHURCH IS NOT LIKE THE SEAMLESS ROBE OF CHRIST--BUT A CLOAK OF MANY COLORS. BUT BEFORE WE THINK ABOUT THE MANY PITFALLS ENDURED BY CHRISTIANITY THE WIDE VARIETY OF INTERPRETATIONS, LET

us pause to remember that we all call jesus christ our lord, we all attempt to OVERCOME OUR INHERENT SINFULNESS BY PETITIONS TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. SOMEHOW, VERY DIMLY AT TIMES, BUT SOMEHOW WE ARE UNITED, WE ARE THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST ON EARTH.

THE PICTURE THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN CHURCH PRESENTS HAS BEEN ILLUSTRATED IN TWO STRIKING ANALOGIES--THAT I HAVE BORROWED--ONE BY A PRESBY. MINISTER THE OTHER BY AN EMINENT BRITISH THEOLOGIAN AND HISTORIAN. THE FIRST MAN USING A VERY EARTHY ILLUSTRATION COMPARED THE CHURCH TO A MAN WALKING DOWN A ROAD. THE MAN, THE CHURCH, WAS ON TWO CRUTCHES AND WAS WALKING ON TWO VERY INSUFFICIENT LEGS. THE ONE LEG WAS VERY STIFF AND UNABLE TO BEND, ALTHOUGH LONG AND STRAIGHT. THIS OF COURSE IS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE EXTRA CRUTCHES REPRESENT THE DOCTRINES OF PAPAL INFALLIBILITY AND THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. BECAUSE OF THE STATE OF THIS LEG, VERY LONG AND STIFF, THE MAN FOUND THAT HE COULD MAKE VERY LITTLE PROGRESS DOWN THE ROAD OF HISTORY BUT RATHER SEEMED ONLY TO WALK IN CIRCLES. THE OTHER LEG WAS SHORT, AND THE FOOT ALTHOUGH ENLARGED HAD HUNDREDS OF TOES ALL ATTEMPTING TO MOVE IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. THIS OF COURSE IS PROTESTANTISM.

THE OTHER MAN I MENTIONED COMPARED AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONDITION OF THE CHURCH TO A MIRROR GALLERY, WHERE CURVES IN THE GLASS SURFACES CAUSE

THE MIRRORS TO PRODUCE QUITE DISTORTED REFLECTIONS. ALTHOUGH SOME REFLECTIONS ARE SHORT AND FAT, OTHERS TALL AND THIN THEY ARE ALL REFLECTIONS OF THE SAME THING.

THESE TWO EXAMPLES VERY CLEARLY PORTRAY CHRISTIANITYS PLIGHT. SEEMINGLY IRRESOLUBLE CONFLICTS HAVE MADE PROGRESS AND AT TIMES, VERY EXISTANCE SEEM IMPOSSIBLE--BUT YET THE MUTILATED MAN STILL STRUGGLES DOWN THE ROAD--AND YET THE WARPING IMAGES IN THE GALLERY ARE OF THE SAME OBJECT--HUMAN FINITUDE AND FRAILTY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONFLICTS WITHIN CHRISTIANITY AND YET--CHRISTIANITY REMAINS. IN A REVIVAL TENT, THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE OR THE FIRST CONG. CHURCH OF CHICAGO--THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IS OFFERED TO SINFUL HUMANITY, A SANCTUARY FOR THE WORSHIP OF GOD IS PRESENT AND THIS IS THE CHURCH.

FOR A MOMENT I WOULD LIKE TO RETURN TO THE MIRROR GALLERY AND EXAMINE THE DOMINANT CHARACTERISTICS OF AND MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO REFLECTIONS OF THE CHURCH. IN THE FIRST MIRROR THE CHURCH IS VISIBLE AS A GREAT AND IMPRESSIVE INSTITUTION. IT IS A FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS TOO, OF COURSE, WHO HOLD THE TRUE FAITH AND PARTICIPATE IN THE SACRAMENTS. BUT ITS SPECIFIC DIFFERENTIA LIES IN A CENTRALIZED ORGANIZATION, WHICH HERE IS AT A MAXIMUM. IN STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION THIS CHURCH RESEMBLES A STATE, AND WHAT IS MORE, AN AUTOCRACY. IN THIS CHURCH THE UNDERLYING THEORIES OF POLITICAL AUTOCRACY ARE PUSHED TO THEIR

SPIRIT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT. SALVATION THROUGH BISHOPS, PRESBYTERS OR PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS IS AN OUTRIGHT DISTROTION OF THE FAITH. IT IS A RETURN TO A LEGALISM THAT IS SO TYPICAL OF ALL MEN, WE CAN'T UNDERSTAND OR DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND THAT THROUGH JESUS CHIRST SALVATION WAS OFFERED TO MEN--FREE--FOR THE ASKING. GOD'S FORGIVENESS AND FULFILLING GRACE IS AVAILABLE TO EVERY MAN — WHY MUST WE TRY TO EARN IT? THIS CHARACTERISTIC IS NOT ALONE A ROMAN CATH. PARTICULARITY BUT HAS INVADED, IN A LESSER DEGREE, MUCH OF PROTESTANTISM. IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT "AN INSTITUTION WITH OFFICIAL RULES SEEMS A BETTER SECURITY THAN A FELLOWSHIP WITH DIVINE GIFTS.

BUT NOW LET US LOOK IN THE OTHER MIRROR AND BEHOLD AN EQUAL DISTORTION BUT OF AN EXACTLY OPPOSITE NATURE OF THE ONE JUST DESCRIBED. THE EMPHASIS IN THIS CHURCH SEEMS TO BE ENTIRELY ON THE INDIVIDUAL, TOTALITARIANISM IS QUITE FORGOTTEN — IT IS NOT A GREAT CORPORATE INSTITUTION TAKING PRECEDENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL BUT THE REVERSE. THE BELIEVING INDIVIDUAL BEING THE POINT OF IMPORTANCE OUTWARD INSTITUTIONAL FORMS ARE DECIDEDLY SECONDARY. THIS CHURCH CLAIMS TO BE A FELLOWSHIP OF INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE FAITH AND SEEK TO WALK TOGETHER IN OBEDIANCE TO HIM. IMPRESSIVE AS THIS MAY BE IF IT EXCLUDES CERTAIN OTHER DOCTRINES IT IS A DISTORTION TOO.

THERE IS A DEFINITE WEAKNESS THAT ACCOMPANIES HERE ASSOCIATION WITH ONE

ANOTHE AND WITH A SPECIFIC DENOMINATION--THE CHURCH OFT TIMES DEGENERATES TO SOMETHING SECTARIAN AND LOCAL. THERE ARE THREE SPECIFIC PITFALLS THAT ALWAYS CONFRONT PROTESTANTISM OF ANY FORM.

THE FIRST IS THE PERIL OF INDEPENDANCE--THERE IS ALWAYS THE DANGER THAT IN OUR MINDS WE WILL ASSUME THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH IN OUR OWN LOCAL DENOMINATION INDIVIDUAL CONGREGATIONS ARE NOT PRIOR TO THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL--BUT BUDS, AND STEMS OF ITS MASSIVE TRUNK.

SECONDLY, THE PERIL OF INDIVIDUALISM--A NORMAL & TYPICAL DREAD OF FORMALISM AND CEREMONY IN RELIGION HAS SOMETIMES BEEN PUSHED TO A DREAD OF ALL OUTWARD FORMS--LEAVING A COMPLETE VACANCY INTO WHICH WE INSERT THE INDIVIDUAL. THIS INDIVIDUALISM IGNORES THE FACT THAT THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH THROUGH ITS WORKING MINISTRY AND SACRAMENTS IS NOT A HELP TO RELIGION--IT IS RELIGION.

THIRDLY THE PERIL OF SECTIONS PLAGUES EVERY BRANCH, EVERY DENOMINATION OF PROTESTANTISM--HOW EASY IT IS TO FEEL THAT OUR DENOMINATION IS THE BEST, THE NEAREST TO THE N.T. CHURCH, THE ONE MOST PLEASING TO GOD. THIS SPIRITUAL PRIDE, THIS PROJECTION OF OUR OWN PREFERENCES TO THOSE OF GOD IS A DANGER TO ALL SEGMENTS OF CHRISTIANITY.

IT IS QUITE CLEAR THAT THE CHURCH CANNOT SEE ITS TRUE SELF IN EITHER OF THESE